

LA FONTAINE AND HIS VIEWS ON MARRIAGE

by Philip A. Wadsworth

Modern critics, Anglo-Saxons in particular, sometimes seem shocked or disturbed by La Fontaine's "eccentric" moral lapses, such as his affairs with women or his "abandonment" of his wife. He is also condemned because he wrote so many tales about seduction and adultery. But marriage customs differ greatly from century to century and in various areas of the world. North Americans have renounced much of their Puritan heritage and have come to believe in marriage for love, a romantic concept which is even extended to divorce and remarriage. But in seventeenth-century France love scarcely entered the picture. The legal aspect of matrimony outweighed all considerations of sentiment. Marriage was a partnership for the orderly merging of family properties and the procreation of legitimate heirs. The *mariage de convenance* shaped the destiny not only of kings and princes—as it still does today—but also of every person who possessed any property, or wealth, or the least claim to nobility. At the same time divorce was unthinkable, for religious reasons, and marital infidelity was easily condoned. Husband and mistress, or wife and lover, can be found everywhere in French life and letters. Viewed in this light the story of La Fontaine's married life loses much of its immorality and falls within the accepted social patterns of his age.¹

As older son he was expected to carry on the family name, and his father arranged a suitable marriage for him. The comment by Tallemant des Réaux is undoubtedly correct: "Son père l'a marié, et lui l'a fait par complaisance."² Nothing could be more natural. He had reached his middle twenties. It was time to settle down, get married, and assume his father's duties as *maître des eaux et forêts*. In agreeing to take a wife he did not bind himself to give up his amorous pursuits outside the home. He probably indulged in wenching and he may have embarked on one or two serious love affairs.

Up to the time of his marriage La Fontaine's life seems rather shapeless and empty, for lack of documents, but we may recall a few of the known dates and events. Born at Château-Thierry a day or two before July 8,

1621—the date of his baptismal certificate—he grew up in this provincial town and presumably received his early education there. Around 1635 he seems to have gone to Paris for further study, apparently attending the same school as Antoine Furetière, perhaps receiving a bachelor's degree around 1640; the precise details are very uncertain. Unaware of his real talents he tried his hand at one career after another: eighteen months in a seminary, studying for the priesthood—for which he clearly had no vocation—followed by some work leading to a degree in law. In the years just before his marriage he was often in Paris, presumably as a law student, and made his first contacts with the world of letters. He met periodically in taverns with an exuberant group of aspiring young poets who liked to call themselves “Knights of the Round Table.” This lazy and carefree existence ended when he came home, or was summoned home, to accept his share of the family responsibilities.

The marriage contract between Jean de La Fontaine and Marie Héricart was signed on November 10, 1647, and it is supposed that their wedding took place soon afterwards. At this time the poet was twenty-six years old and his bride was fourteen and one-half, ages which were irreproachable according to the customs of seventeenth-century France. He came from one of the best bourgeois families of Château-Thierry and she from a prosperous family in the nearby town of La Ferté-Milon. Her dowry was valued at 30,000 livres, a substantial figure, and for his part he had some property inherited from his mother plus some prospective income from his aging father; the married couple could look forward to a comfortable life together.

Their marriage worked out reasonably well and seems to have brought them a fair share of happiness, at least for the next six or eight years, and perhaps much longer. They made occasional trips to Paris, staying at the house of Marie's uncle, Jacques Jannart, who was an influential lawyer and a close associate of Nicolas Fouquet, La Fontaine's first important literary patron. One can imagine that the poet watched over his wife's education—or at least joined her in the reading of novels, her favorite literary fare—for she became a woman of some culture and refinement and even a sort of provincial *femme savante*. She was related to the family of Jean Racine and was doubtless instrumental—around 1660 it seems—in making the two poets acquainted with one another. In 1662 Racine sent La Fontaine some of his early verse, asking his opinion of it and adding: “Je fais la même prière à votre Académie de Château-Thierry, surtout à Mlle de la Fontaine.”³ Nothing is known about this *académie* but it probably was a literary club or coterie in which the poet and his wife both played an active part.

In the first few years of his married life La Fontaine may have devoted himself to reading and perhaps to a little writing, for he had no settled

occupation. It was not until 1652 that he obtained his posts as *maître des eaux et forêts* and *capitaine des chasses* for the duchy of Château-Thierry, functions that would occupy him intermittently for the next twenty years. In 1653 he provided his family with an heir, a son named Charles, and with this duty fulfilled he apparently paid little or no further attention to the boy, for he had no interest in children (although he saw the advantage in dedicating certain volumes of fables to scions of the royal family). One may recall his expressions of distaste for childish pranks, in several of the fables and tales, or his comment in a letter dealing with a distant relative whom he visited at Châtellerault; he failed to notice how many children the man had, ". . . mon humeur n'étant nullement de m'arrêter à ce petit peuple" (*OD*, 564). But one reason why he devoted little time to his wife and son is that he was working seriously at his first important literary effort and making frequent trips to Paris to get it launched.

L'Eunuque, his comedy in imitation of the one by Terence, seems not to have appeared on the stage but it was published in the summer of 1654. Composed over a period of several years by an author still unsure of himself, it turned out to be quite an uneven play: rather laborious throughout most of the first three acts, then much livelier toward the end. It has obvious faults in conception and execution, yet it offers the reader many amusing passages and some sparkling comic scenes. This is not the place to study it in detail but it interests us because of certain love themes which may reflect something of the poet's personality or state of mind.

In his adaptation of the comedy by Terence, La Fontaine was obliged to eliminate certain subjects—prostitution and rape—to conform to the rule of *bienséance* or propriety which all seventeenth-century French dramatists accepted. The courtesan, Thaïs, is transformed into a young widow, poor but perfectly respectable. She sometimes compares herself unfavorably to the virginal Pamphile, her adopted sister: "Ah! que si j'eusse été fille encore comme elle!" (*OD*, 319). But this imperfection does not prevent her from admiring a young man, Phédrie, who adores her and wins her hand when the comedy reaches its happy outcome. As for Pamphile, she is worshipped at first sight by Chérée, the brother of Phédrie, and they too become betrothed at the end of the play. Everything revolves about the amorous desires of these two young couples. Their ages may be significant. Pamphile is said to be sixteen and Thaïs appears to be two or three years older. Chérée's age is given as twenty, presumably a few years less than his brother. They are in love, emotionally and physically, but they have reached the years of nubility; they are not interested in flirtation or seduction, but rather in marriage.

L'Eunuque has other characters, of course, and various complications which go to make up the plot. Although "true love" is the central theme it

has an interesting garland of variations. Parmenon, the clever slave, keeps making fun of the two brothers' hopeless passion. Thrason, the boastful but cowardly soldier, has failed to seduce Pamphile and now tries awkwardly to win the favors of Thaïs. Chremès, a sort of wealthy playboy, flirts with a quick-witted servant girl in a scene that is farcical and slightly ribald (IV, viii). The amusing diversions make the play more enjoyable, alleviating the seriousness which is occasionally inevitable when the two pairs of lovers express their various hopes and fears.

They make frequent declarations of their feelings, in terms which may seem exaggerated but which belong to the traditions of love poetry. Here for example is Phédrie, in the opening scene, jealous and suspicious because Thaïs seems to be encouraging the attentions of Thrason:

Je sais qu'elle est perfide, et je l'aime, et je meurs,
Et je me sens mourir, et n'y vois nul remède,
Et craindrais d'en trouver, tant l'amour me possède.

But very soon (I, ii) their *dépit amoureux* is temporarily resolved when Thaïs assures him of her love and bursts into tears. Phédrie is supposed to leave her for two days (so that Thrason will help her find the parents of Pamphile) but he is unable to stay away and soon comes back, protesting:

Que direz-vous enfin de ma foi violée?
Si l'aïse de vous voir pour un peu reculée
A rendu mon esprit toujours inquiété,
Si le jour, loin de vous, me paraît sans clarté,
Si je veille au plus fort de l'ombre et du silence,
Jugez ce que ferait une plus longue absence;
Et si mon amour craint le seul éloignement,
Jugez ce que ferait un triste changement.

(IV, vi)

Perhaps the high point of the play, in a scene which, incidentally, owes nothing to Terence, is the first conversation between Chérée and Pamphile (IV, i). He is disguised as an eunuch—so that he can meet her and speak with her privately—but he reveals his identity and declares his love, and Pamphile, shocked at first, soon responds rather warmly.

The charm of young love must be infectious, for it invades the older characters in the play, notably Damis, the father of Phédrie and Chérée. His sons fear that he will not sanction their choice of brides and they speak of defying him at the risk of being disinherited. But it turns out that Damis is eager to have his sons marry the girls they love. His attitude comes partly from the persuasiveness of Parmenon, a resourceful go-between in family problems, and partly from his own native kindness mellowed by advancing years. He has reached the age, as Parmenon explains, when he would like to live quietly at home and "caresser, les pieds chauds, quelque bru qui lui

plaise; / conter son jeune temps; banqueter à son aise" (*OD*, 332). In fact Damis has said that youthful escapades and transitory love affairs can never offer the endless pleasure and happiness "que cause un sacré noeud dont deux coeurs sont unis" (*ibid.*). The father, just like his sons, believes in marriage as the source of supreme felicity.

Literary conventions play a large part in this. If one looks at seventeenth-century comedy as a genre—or at the comedies of Corneille, before *L'Eunuque*, and those of Molière a little later—one finds countless young couples bent on matrimony. There is always some obstacle in their course, very often parental opposition to the match, but in the end problems are resolved, parents mollified, and wedding preparations announced. Despite these hackneyed themes we may be tempted to find in *L'Eunuque* some faint echoes from La Fontaine's own life—the period of courtship and the first happy years of marriage. It seems quite possible that he and Marie contributed something to the sentiments of the young lovers in *L'Eunuque* and—of this I feel fairly sure—that his own father, a very likable old man from all accounts, entered into his portrayal of Damis. One reason for suggesting these parallels is that the comedy is unique among La Fontaine's works—the only one (of any magnitude) where his characters purport to be real people, the only one where the author must concern himself with problems of plausibility or verisimilitude.

This point needs to be stressed. One reason for the subtlety of La Fontaine's writings is that his characters wear some sort of mask which prevents them from being recognized as individuals or as ordinary human beings. In the fables persons are partially disguised as animals; in the tales they are puppets manipulated in frankly preposterous situations. In other works we may find shepherds in a make-believe pastoral world, or ancient gods and goddesses, or heroes and nymphs from the pages of mythology. Thus the poet is not constrained by the usual rules for verisimilitude; the distance between fiction and life has been increased; another dimension has been added. But he had not yet achieved this manner in *L'Eunuque*. Its failure as a work of art seems to arise from the facts that La Fontaine sometimes imitated Terence too closely and that, when departing from his source, he surrendered too easily to the theatrical conventions of his age. He had not found the freedom he needed: a twofold freedom, partly esthetic and partly personal. A revolt against family life, an escape from Château-Thierry to Paris, was necessarily involved in the fulfillment of his literary aspirations.

But these events came about slowly and not until some years later. In the late 1650's we find him concerned with sales of property and other business matters—see his letters to Jannart, Marie's uncle (*OD*, 480-487)—and trying to pay off the debts left by his father at his death in 1658. In 1659

the poet and his wife arranged a legal separation "quant aux biens," apparently at the time of her majority (age 25), so that her dowry would not be endangered by his financial problems. In these same years he made his way to the center of Nicolas Fouquet's almost royal court and composed various pieces in honor of the wealthy finance minister, receiving some sort of regular pension for his efforts. He was not indifferent to the charms of women, to judge by his irreverent *Lettre à l'abbesse de Mouzon* (OD, 491-493) or by his infatuation with the young wife of Guillaume Colletet (OD, 487-489). Indeed, it was around this time (1657-1658) that Tallemant des Réaux, generally reliable as a collector of biographical notes and pornographic gossip, related various anecdotes dealing with La Fontaine's absent-mindedness, with some transient amorous escapades, and with the deteriorating relations between man and wife:

Sa femme dit qu'il rêve tellement qu'il est quelquefois trois semaines sans croire être marié. C'est une coquette qui s'est assez mal gouvernée depuis quelque temps: il ne s'en tourmente point. On lui dit: "Mais un tel cajole votre femme." — "Ma foi!" répond-il, "qu'il fasse ce qu'il pourra; je ne m'en soucie point. Il s'en lassera comme j'ai fait." Cette indifférence a fait enrager cette femme; elle sèche de chagrin: lui, est amoureux où il peut.⁴

The passage is intact but omits several scabrous details which precede and follow it. The very nature of Tallemant's *Historiettes*—a casual and fairly authentic chronicle of mistresses and lovers, cuckoldry, love affairs—suggests the moral tone which existed then in upper-class French society. Illicit love was very prevalent and apparently people talked about it freely, even crudely. As for La Fontaine's relationship with his wife, the text has various levels of credibility. The words ascribed to La Fontaine may be exaggerated and may have reached Tallemant at second or third hand. The allusion to his wife's flirtations or reprisals seems far-fetched; at least it is not supported by any other contemporary documents. But it is clear, and this fact is well substantiated, that by the end of ten years of married life the poet had become an inattentive and exasperating husband. It seems that Marie still loved him, as Clarac has argued very persuasively,⁵ and that she had good reason to feel chagrined and neglected.

Although the honeymoon was over this does not mean that he abandoned her or that he had no further warmth of feeling for her. They would continue to live together for many years, until 1671 or 1672, and he occasionally showed signs of continued fondness, notably in his *Voyage en Limousin*. It will be recalled that the glory of Fouquet reached its zenith in August of 1661, with the famous garden party at Vaux in honor of Louis XIV, and that it collapsed a few weeks later when the young king ordered Fouquet's arrest and imprisonment on charges of embezzling public funds. La Fontaine suddenly lost a powerful patron who was also a good

friend. He may have had some further involvement in Fouquet's disgrace because of his close relations with Jannart, the financier's legal adviser. In any event, when Jannart was exiled to Limoges, in 1663, the poet accompanied him on the trip. He recorded his experiences along the way, with considerable gaiety, in a series of letters to his wife. Six of the letters have survived and are known as the *Voyage en Limousin*. Since we have no other works or letters which he may have addressed to his wife the *Voyage* is a major document for studying their married life.

Why did he bother to write the letters? As he explains in a sort of pre-ambule to the first letter (*OD*, 533), Marie does not concern herself much with housework or other tasks and does not play cards. (It should be mentioned that gambling was one of the poet's favorite diversions.) She rarely goes out, it seems—and there may be an allusion to some illness in this remark—and depends for amusement on visits from her friends. She spends a lot of time reading and rereading novels (like La Fontaine himself) and this literary diet inevitably becomes monotonous. He suggests that she relieve her boredom by the perusal of travel journals, but not taking them too seriously and not stocking her mind with erudition: "Ce n'est pas une bonne qualité pour une femme d'être savante . . ." (*OD*, 533). He offers her his own playful letters as a point of departure. Thus La Fontaine seems to have been motivated mainly by a sincere desire to provide a pleasant pastime for his wife, giving her what he later calls "un amusement qui vous doit faire passer notre exil avec moins d'ennui" (*OD*, 551). But he had a secondary and more selfish motive. He worked very carefully at the letters, as the manuscript revisions show, and—although they were not intended for publication—he apparently expected them to be passed around among his friends or perhaps read aloud at sessions of the Académie de Château-Thierry. The *Voyage en Limousin* is in this sense a literary work, a fact which veils its personal qualities and makes them hard to assess. As he says of his journal, at the very outset, "Il s'y rencontrera pourtant des matières peu convenables à votre goût: c'est à moi de les assaisonner, si je puis, en telle sorte qu'elles vous plaisent . . ." (*OD*, 533).

Along with descriptions of landscapes, towns, and works of art, the letters have an important recurrent theme: the author's encounters with women during the trip, always with the idea of flirtation in mind. A mysterious countess who traveled in the same coach might have tempted him if she had been prettier: ". . . j'y eusse trouvé matière de cajolerie, si la beauté s'y fût rencontrée; mais sans elle rien ne me touche . . ." (*OD*, 536). At Châtellerault he met a distant cousin, an attractive girl in spite of small-pox scars, and paused to wonder "si elle est capable d'une passion secrète" (*OD*, 565). Arriving at Bellac, with its wretched inn and unpalatable food and wine, he found some consolation in chatting playfully with

the innkeeper's daughter. Then he went off to bed and slept very soundly, but "si pourtant Morphée m'eût amené la fille de l'hôte, je pense bien que je ne l'aurais pas renvoyée . . ." (OD, 567). Similarly, he regretted not stopping at Poitiers because he had heard of the city's many beautiful, fun-loving girls: "J'eus quelque regret de n'y point passer; vous en pourriez aisément deviner la cause" (OD, 565). From such comments it is obvious that La Fontaine was always attracted by the charms of young women. But he did not pursue them at all actively, it would seem; perhaps time did not permit. His interest in these women can be called esthetic—with perhaps a grain of wishful thinking—rather than simply sensual or lustful.

In writing this way to his wife La Fontaine doubtless asserts his independence from the bonds of matrimony. It was no secret to her, or to their friends and relatives, that he had committed infidelities and was capable of doing so again. But his attitude is partly a literary pose. He is teasing his wife, stressing or even inventing pungent details. When describing statues or pictures he tries to shock the reader, gently and wittily, as in this remark about an oil painting: "C'est une Magdelaine du Titian, grosse et grasse, et fort agréable; de beaux tétons comme aux premiers jours de sa pénitence, auparavant que le jeûne eût commencé d'empiéter sur elle" (OD, 558). The *Voyage en Limousin* was composed around the same time that La Fontaine was working on his first tales in verse and the two types of works have much in common, both in their storytelling technique and their playfully suggestive manner. But these artistic preoccupations do not prevent the letters from having a certain warmth and tenderness. He took the trouble to write them and he enjoyed making fun of his wife's rather precious tastes: "De l'humeur dont je vous connais, une galanterie [récit léger ou fantaisiste] sur ces matières vous plaira plus que tant d'observations savantes et curieuses" (OD, 552). The letters demonstrate that La Fontaine, although perhaps an unconventional and unsatisfactory husband, was still a rather affectionate one.

In ways the poet can be considered a marriage counselor, for he never tired of giving opinions on marital relations. His advice may seem unorthodox, even immoral, particularly if one thinks of his *Contes*, in which the time-honored theme of adultery necessarily looms on almost every page. La Fontaine could not restrain himself from writing these stories (and his readers loved them), but one is struck by the poet's sprinkling them so lavishly with his comments, admonitions, discussions—almost like the moral lessons of the fables. His many remarks on marriage have a joking tone, of course, and one can seldom accept them at full face value.

Throughout the tales in verse the betrayal of husbands by their wives is treated as an inconsequential turn of events, in fact sometimes desirable and beneficial. *La Coupe enchantée* (III, 4) has a long prologue which

argues that husbands are wrong if they experience jealousy or interfere with their wives' pleasure, that an attractive, easygoing wife can be a great asset, and that "cocuage n'est pas un mal." The poet claims, finally, that "cocuage est un bien." Similar suggestions can be found in many of the tales. In *Le Cocu battu et content* (I, 3) La Fontaine dwells on the extreme pleasure of making love to a "femme jolie, et qui n'est point à soi." But here there is a more serious undercurrent, as in the opening message of *Le Calendrier des vieillards* (II, 8): a criticism of marriage customs which permit old men to take young wives whose physical needs they cannot satisfy. The poet is upholding the rights of nature and of youth over prudish codes of morality.

If a man is betrayed by his wife—and this is quite likely in the wanton world of the *Contes*—he should accept the situation and do nothing about it. Any action is futile, because women are incorrigible and supremely clever, as we are told in *On ne s'avise jamais de tout* (II, 10). Also, it is wise to hush matters up to avoid any scandal. When Joconde finds his wife and a servant asleep together his first impulse is to kill them but he soon changes his mind:

Mais cependant il n'en fit rien;
Et mon avis est qu'il fit bien.
Le moins de bruit que l'on peut faire
En telle affaire
Est le plus sûr de la moitié.

(I, 1; FCN, 353)

It will be recalled that Joconde, instead of punishing his wife, learns a lesson from her: he embarks on a career of adventure and seduction, makes many conquests, discovers that all women are equally false and fickle, and eventually returns home to live happily with his wife again.

Sometimes La Fontaine condemns marriage as the death knell of real love. In *Belphégor* (V, 7) he discusses various relationships between the sexes and suggests that only unmarried couples can share the indulgent kindness of friendship and the joy of love that has not grown stale:

Chez les amis, tout s'excuse, tout passe;
Chez les amants, tout plaît, tout est parfait;
Chez les époux, tout ennuie et tout lasse.

(FCN, 645)

In the stories from mythology entitled *Les Filles de Minée* the three virginal sisters are afraid both of the sometimes tragic consequences of illegitimate love and also of marriage which soon puts an end to "cette passion": "Sans l'hymen on n'en doit recueillir aucun fruit, / Et cependant l'hymen est ce qui la détruit" (FCN, 331). Of the two alternatives wedlock appears to be the more dreadful; the story of a very coldhearted man causes one of the

sisters to make a declaration in favor of love: "Les morts sont donc heureux? Ce n'est pas mon avis:/ Je veux des passions . . ." (*FCN*, 338). A somewhat similar attitude is expressed in *Psyché* in commentary on the kisses exchanged by hero and heroine: ". . . les baisers; non point de mari à femme, il n'y a rien de plus insipide, mais de maîtresse à amant, et, pour ainsi dire, de gens qui n'en seraient encore qu'à l'espérance" (*OD*, 152). Also, Cupid warns his wife that she must not see him or learn who he is; their marriage can remain blissful only if it is cloaked in mystery and yearning: "Tenez-vous certaine que du moment que vous n'aurez plus rien à souhaiter, vous vous ennuierez . . . l'entière satisfaction et le dégoût se tiennent la main!" (*OD*, 153). In view of the supernatural situation in *Psyché* one would have to conclude that permanently happy marriage is an impossibility for ordinary mortals.

The element of mystery in the relations between *Psyché* and Cupid could perhaps be achieved by another arrangement which appealed to La Fontaine: the secret pact or trial marriage. In *La Courtisane amoureuse* (*Contes*, III, 6) Camille succeeds in his courtship of Constance and urges that they keep their marriage concealed: "Un tel hymen à des amours ressemble:/ Ou est époux et galant tout ensemble." Again, in one of his letters from Limousin, La Fontaine tells his wife the story of a beautiful young heiress and her admirer:

Il y a, dit-on, sacrement entre eux; mais la chose est tenue secrète. Que dites-vous de ces mariages de conscience? . . . On est fille et femme tout à la fois: le mari se comporte en galant . . . et, s'il arrive qu'on se lasse les uns des autres, il ne faut aller ni au juge ni à l'évêque.

(*OD*, 539)

Lest it seem that La Fontaine strongly advocated such irregularities, it should be said that these ideas were being aired quite a lot, by some of the libertines and particularly by the *précieuses* of the period. Trial marriage, free love, even divorce are all discussed in the abbé de Pure's important documentary novel, *La Précieuse, ou le Mystère des ruelles* (1656-58). The abbé's meaning is often ironic, for he is satirizing the *précieuses*, but it is clear that their program called for the emancipation of women (either by freer relations with men or else by complete disdain for them). In *Clymène* we find that one of the Muses, Erato, wants to give up her chastity, have a love affair, and even try "un peu d'hymen," all this "pour éviter le nom de Précieuse" (*OD*, 38). She is tired of being considered a man-hater.

La Fontaine was not a reformer but, from his many comments, one can infer that he held rather liberal and tolerant views on marital relationships. He had little reverence for the vows of matrimony. Home life could become boring and, if husband or wife committed an occasional infidelity, they might perhaps achieve greater happiness. The idea of jealousy was foreign

to his nature. Perhaps the clearest statement of his views is to be found in these lines from one of the tales: "Après mûr examen,/ J'appelle un bon, voire un parfait hymen,/ Quand les conjoints se souffrent leurs sottises" (FCN, 645). Not a noble sentiment, of course, but it seems sincere.

In all these remarks the poet is referring to marriage as an institution or as a situation, real or fictitious, involving other men and women. He is not speaking of his own life nor attempting to justify his irresponsibilities. In fact, whenever he commented on his private affairs, he showed some embarrassment and shame, along with a feeling of helplessness. At the end of *Les Aveux indiscrets* (Contes, V, 5) he urges married couples to remain faithful to one another and also, if some lapse occurs, to keep it a closely guarded secret; then: "Je donne ici de beaux conseils, sans doute: / Les ai-je pris pour moi-même? hélas! non." Thus he makes a regretful admission of both his infidelity and his indiscretion. His yearning for a prolonged and happy married life comes out very clearly in an enthusiastic description, in the *Voyage en Limousin*, of an elderly man and his attractive wife:

. . . elle cajole son mari, et vit avec lui comme si c'était son galant; et je lui sais bon gré d'une chose à son mari, c'est qu'il lui fait encore des enfants. Il y a ainsi d'heureuses vicelles, à qui les plaisirs, l'amour et les grâces tiennent compagnie jusqu'au bout: il n'y en a guère, mais il y en a . . .

(OD, 564)

At this date, when La Fontaine was only 42, he was touched by the unusual spectacle of an aging man who still enjoyed a delightful married life.

A few years later, in the novel of Cupid and Psyche, at the climactic moment when the heroine is about to light the forbidden lamp and see her husband for the first time, La Fontaine made a curious parenthetical remark which has little to do with the events of the story: "Qu'on fasse telle mine que l'on voudra, qu'on se querelle, qu'on se sépare, qu'on proteste de se haïr, il reste toujours un levain d'amour entre deux personnes qui ont été unies si étroitement" (OD, 171). This reflection could well be a nostalgic commentary on his own experience with Marie: various difficulties, quarrels, short periods of separation, but still a leavening of love.

In the late 1660's Jean and Marie still lived together at Château-Thierry most of the time although he made frequent trips alone to visit friends in Paris, where he now had a small sinecure as "gentilhomme servant" at the Luxembourg Palace, and to other places, notably Rheims. It was not until 1671 or 1672, after almost 25 years together, that he and Marie began to lead separate lives. Henceforth the poet spent virtually all his time in Paris, housed by one protectress or another. As for his wife, "ennuyée de vivre avec son mari," if we may believe the comment of Louis Racine,⁶ she stayed at home in Château-Thierry, living quietly and no doubt rather sadly.

This marriage, with its eventual failure, could be better understood if the

partners in it had left a trail of letters and diaries or other documents. Nothing that Marie may have written has been preserved and very little is known about her. She appears in various anecdotes passed on by Tallemant des Réaux and Louis Racine—such as the perfunctory duel that La Fontaine may have had with a friend who was said to admire her. But these incidents, even if they have some factual basis, are impossible to date and have obviously been embellished to make good stories. Also, they show little interest in Marie de La Fontaine, being presented as examples of her husband's already legendary eccentricity and absent-mindedness. A portrait of her, attributed to Mignard, has been reproduced in a study by Clarac.⁷ It shows a woman of dignity and breeding, possibly 35 to 40 years old, with an attractive but rather angular face and an expression of resignation or sadness in her large dark eyes. The portrait suggests a certain primness or austerity which, in the long run, her husband could have found quite tiresome.

Other conjectures about Marie have arisen from possible allusions to her in the poet's works, notably the character of Honesta in one of his tales (*Belphégor*, V, 7). Honesta is a haughty, quarrelsome woman who makes her husband quite miserable. But it was not until the eighteenth century, in D'Olivet's history of the French Academy, that La Fontaine's wife was suggested as the model for Honesta, and it is hard to see where D'Olivet could have obtained reliable information. Besides, the poet follows his source, Machiavelli, quite closely in his portrayal of Honesta and in the general treatment of the story. La Fontaine does insert some personal remarks here and there and also a kind of moral lesson at the end:

De tout ceci que prétends-je inférer?
 Premièrement, je ne sais pire chose
 Que de changer son logis en prison.
 En second lieu, si par quelque raison
 Votre ascendant à l'hymen vous expose,
 N'épousez point d'Honestà, s'il se peut:
 N'a pas pourtant une Honesta qui veut.
 (FCN, 649)

These amusing, ironical comments may convey a distaste for the fetters of married life, or a dislike for domineering women, but they do not seem aimed specifically at Mme de La Fontaine.

One of the fables, *Le Mal Marié* (VII, 2), has also been called an attack on the poet's wife. It begins incisively: "Que le bon soit toujours camarade du beau, / Dès demain je chercherai femme;" then goes on to describe a miserly faultfinding woman who constantly criticizes her easygoing, lazy husband. He tries to cure her, then at last simply leaves her. It is tempting to find a parallel between the fable and the poet's life. But the pattern of the story was already present in Aesop and the few added details seem to

come from a concern for artistic problems. The fable jests about marriage—a time-honored subject for satire—but it tells us little or nothing that can be definitely ascribed to Marie de La Fontaine. Her character must remain an enigma until better evidence is found. The poet treated his wife with the greatest of reserve, or—conceivably—during most of his literary career he did not find her interesting enough to mention.

His role as husband is somewhat better known because he liked to dwell upon the errors of his life. He refers repeatedly to his many infatuations and to the ardor with which he pursued each prospective conquest. After being tricked by the literary hoax of Claudine Colletet (whose husband wrote poems, publishing them over her signature) he recalled with some amusement his gullible and excited admiration for her: “. . . pour peu que j'aime je ne vois dans les défauts des personnes non plus qu'une taupe . . . Dès que j'ai un grain d'amour, je ne manque pas d'y mêler tout ce qu'il y a d'encens dans mon magasin: . . . je dis des sottises en vers et en prose” (OD, 487). His most famous confession of his frequent and impetuous love affairs occurs in the *Discours à Mme de La Sablière* which he read aloud—in the French Academy, of all places—when he was admitted to membership in 1684:

A peine la raison vint éclairer mon âme,
Que je sentis l'ardeur de ma première flamme.
Plus d'une passion a depuis dans mon cœur
Exercé tous les droits d'un superbe vainqueur.
(OD, 646)

The lines are penitential but they seem to contain a little boasting or at least a defense of his own individuality: he loved because he was incapable of doing otherwise. This attitude comes out very clearly in one of his elegies:

Que faire? mon destin est tel qu'il faut que j'aime,
On m'a pourvu d'un cœur peu content de lui-même,
Inquiet, et fécond en nouvelles amours:
Il aime à s'engager, mais non pas pour toujours.
(OD, 603)

All this suggests that he indulged in many heated flirtations, none of them lasting very long.

“Inquiétude” and “inconstance” are the words he nearly always uses to describe his temperament and especially his relations with women, what he calls “l'inconstance d'une âme en ses plaisirs légère, / Inquiète, et partout hôtesse passagère” (OD, 645). Or else he may speak of himself as an “homme inégal,” as in *Clymène*: “Inégal en amour, en plaisir, en affaire” (OD, 32). This inconstancy does not indicate fickleness but rather restlessness, shifting moods and interests, an indomitable need for variety and change. One of his tales has the refrain, “Diversité c'est ma devise,” and

suggests that even a woman's beauty cannot hold his interest very long: "Même beauté, tant soit exquise, / Rassasie et soûle à la fin" (*Contes*, IV, 11). In *Psyché* he makes a similar but more poignant reflection: "... car à la fin on s'ennuie de tout, et des belles choses comme du reste" (*OD*, 146). La Fontaine was inclined toward melancholy and boredom. The various women whom he courted, his wife included, could not hold any prolonged fascination for him. He was unfaithful, yes, but not to himself. He needed freedom and clung to it tenaciously, both in his art and in his life.

Because of his restless nature he was not a man of passion, or never for very long. He admitted freely that he kept falling in love and that he seldom gained the satisfaction or happiness which he was seeking. Many of his works—particularly those written when he was about 40 to 50 years old—have love as a central theme and seem inspired by his adoration for various women. Not the tales and fables, to be sure, but certain more personal compositions: *Le Songe de Vaux*, *Adonis* as revised in the edition of 1669, *Psyché* which appeared at the same time, the comedy entitled *Clymène*, and the series of four elegies published in 1671. The first of these elegies begins with the complaint: "Amour, que t'ai-je fait? dis-moi quel est mon crime: / D'où vient que je te sers tous les jours de victime?" (*OD*, 601). Then it goes on to list the cruel ladies who have wounded his heart: Chloris, who hurried him too much, Amarille, who kept postponing her favors, Philis, who almost yielded when their privacy was interrupted, "la sévère Diane," Chloé, Amarante, etc. The names are all fictitious but the various situations described seem to be based on real events, on real outbursts of emotion which were rebuffed or somehow unrewarded. But the second elegy takes up a new theme: "Me voici rembarqué sur la mer amoureuse, / Moi pour qui tant de fois elle fut malheureuse" (*OD*, 603). The poet, still undaunted, proceeds to declare his passion for a mysterious young widow who, unfortunately, clings faithfully to the memory of her husband. Uninhibited but also unlucky, La Fontaine apparently had a special faculty for courting the wrong woman or of opening his heart at the wrong time.

These affairs, even his successes, were of short duration and attracted no attention. By 1668, with the triumph of the first collection of fables, La Fontaine had become a public figure and his activities were well known and rather fully recorded. But one can search all the documents in vain; there is no suggestion anywhere of a prolonged or really passionate love affair. One finds some passing flirtations and some contacts with women of easy virtue but no enduring attachments having a deep emotional involvement. The only possible exception is his marriage. We cannot guess how much or how long he loved Marie but they maintained a fairly satisfactory family relationship for almost 25 years.

But this is not the whole story. Starting around 1673, La Fontaine lived apart from his wife, for about 20 years or more, as a guest of Mme de La Sablière in her home in Paris. This was a richly productive period in his literary career. Presumably he returned to Château-Thierry from time to time, for reasons of business, but nothing is known about his visits with his wife.

During this separation he was sometimes hounded with regret, or preoccupied with the ideals of married life. These concerns can be seen first of all in *Saint Malc* (1673) when the poet was in close touch with the Jansenists, an austere group of religious reformers.

In his later years he wrote *Philémon et Baucis* (published in 1685, *FCN*, 323-327), a poem based on Ovid, in praise of a simple and perfectly happy marriage. It contains lines where the poet speaks of his own failure as a husband: "Ils s'aimaient jusqu'au bout, malgré l'effort des ans. / Ah! si . . . Mais autre part j'ai porté mes présents" (*FCN*, 326).

Then came the years of illness, of religious repentance, of public expressions of remorse for having written certain "immoral" works. The priest who attended La Fontaine, starting in 1692, must have insisted on a regularization of the poet's marital relations. All this emerges in the famous letter of October, 1693 (*OD*, 727-734), bringing news from Château-Thierry and a long commentary on certain religious homilies.

La Fontaine's married life was somewhat unconventional, rather negligent on his part, and at times almost forgotten. But it never collapsed, it was revived occasionally, and it was solidified before his death in 1695. For his "âme inquiète" his wife probably provided the greatest element of fortitude and stability, throughout his life.

NOTES

1. For studies of the position of women in French life and literature, see the following: Francis Bauman, *Le Féminisme au temps de Molière* (Paris, 1923), dealing mainly with *préciosité*; Nina Epton, *Love and the French* (New York, 1959), ranging widely in literary and social history; Denis de Rougemont, *L'Amour et l'Occident* (Paris, 1939), starting with the Tristan legend and going on to other problems of marriage and adultery; Maurice Valency, *In Praise of Love* (New York, 1958), mainly on the *troubadours* and poets of the Italian Renaissance; and Paul Zumthor, *Miroirs de l'amour* (Paris, 1952), with some good chapters on D'Urfé and other seventeenth-century writers. Note that many references are given parenthetically (*OD* or *FCN*): these refer to the two volumes providing La Fontaine's complete works in the "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" (Paris). *OD* indicates

- his *Œuvres diverses*, ed. Pierre Clarac (revised, 1958). *FCN* stands for his *Fables, Contes et Nouvelles*, ed. Groos and Schiffrin (revised, 1954). Some of the tales and fables are referred to under the usual book and number, e.g. III, 9.
2. Tallemant des Réaux, *Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam, (Paris, 1960-61) I; 392.
 3. Jean Racine, *Œuvres*, ed. Paul Mesnard (Paris, 1885-88) VI, 506.
 4. Tallemant des Réaux, I, 392.
 5. Pierre Clarac, *La Fontaine par lui-même*, Editions du Seuil (Paris, 1961) pp. 40-42.
 6. Racine, *Œuvres*, I, 336.
 7. Clarac, p. 41.